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An Interview with Chinese Underground Rock Musician
Zuoxiao Zuzhou
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By Tim Hathaway

A quick listen to Zuoxiao Zuzhou’s (左小祖咒) music would not be enough to explain his fame. His trademark is singing off key.

In spite of the odd sounding vocals or perhaps because of its contrast to the saccharine sweet sounds of Chinese pop and rock, Zuoxiao has become one of China’s most successful rock musicians.

He started his career in 1993 and has since produced ten albums. He has also published a best selling novel and created sculptures and artistic photography. He was a founding member of the avant garde artists residence called Beijing’s "East Village” in the early 1990s where he first met Ai Weiwei and others whom he still collaborates with.

Zuoxiao recently worked with the Canadian rock band Cowboy Junkies on their new album Renmin Park which came out in June. The Junkies covered one of his songs and asked him to do the vocals on another.

The following is a compilation of two interviews I did with Zuoxiao regarding his collaboration with the Junkies and his own career as a Chinese musician, writer, and artist.

TH: Can you explain why you have such a distinct singing style? What reactions has it gotten?

ZXZZ: I’ve always wanted to make art more intimate and use a singing style that’s relatively easy to communicate with and to distill my art. But you know, when it comes to the aesthetics, most people stop at the level of enjoyment or its purported educational value, so there are people who say they like what I do. Others admire it. Others are indignant. There’s all kinds of reactions.

TH: How did you meet Michael Timmins of Cowboy Junkies?

ZXZZ: We’ve never actually met, nor have we even directly communicated because we speak different languages. For the last two years a rock critic named Eric Chen has been our go between and helped us communicate. I’m very thankful that Cowboy Junkies thought high enough of my work. Their cover of “I Cannot Sit Sadly by Your Side” has been better received than my own version.

TH: How do you compare their sound and style to other Chinese musicians? Who do they remind you of?

ZXZZ: Cowboy Junkies’ form is similar to Xu Wei. There’s just a touch of that in there. Xu Wei also does folk, but Cowboy Junkies do a different kind of folk. They can be fairly heady sometimes. They consider me a folk artist as well. I think I’m actually a bit more wild than that.

TH: Why did you agree to work with them?

ZXZZ: I heard a kind of benevolence in their music. They are very creative artists and their love for music is almost beyond imagination. They really know what they’re doing when it comes to making new music.

I remember Michael once wrote [through email] that he thought my music is a mix between Nick Cave and Leonard Cohen and my style of expression is a bit like Tom Waits. But your music can never truly be copied. Even though I wasn’t too happy about this comparison, what can you do to make him say something else? I think maybe he’s right in a very narrow sense.
TH: Please describe the collaboration process.

ZXZZ: First of all, they said the name of the song we were going to do together is “Walking in the Park.” I wasn’t able to do the vocals for three months after they sent it to me. At the time I was busy preparing my concert All the Best (万事如意), so I asked them to give me some time. I wrote the lyrics really quickly and I made them fairly simple so that westerners could understand [Note: he sang in Chinese but the translation is available in the liner notes.] This is because most of my lyrics are laden with references which wouldn’t be appropriate for westerners. One example is: Strolling through the park/Looking to the east, gazing at the west… After it was translated, Michael said he really liked it.

I did the vocals after I did my concert. I used a very casual style for the melody which made it kind of a weird song. What surprised me was that a week later Cowboy Junkies sent me the final mix of the song in which they added kids singing the national anthem. They also put in some of their distinctive electric guitar sounds. I feel they really know how to mess around with stuff like this and have fun. I was originally kind of worried that the song wouldn’t work out but they turned it into something new that works for them.

TH: Michael Timmins said he considers you a “true artist” and someone who does not compromise. How do you view compromise, especially in terms of commercial temptations?

ZXZZ: A pure person cannot go on living. As long as you are alive you have to compromise with the wind and the water. When you record music you’re making an album which you then sell or at least you want people to listen to it.

Neither Cowboy Junkies or I are considered mainstream musicians today. Even though we both have a lot of fans, they have more than I do. It’s relatively easy for people just to live, but a person needs money to live with dignity, maybe even a gun. There’s no need to go to Africa to see this. It’s everywhere. There’s no need to explain all the reasons.

TH: What’s the meaning behind your name?

ZXZZ: There’s no real meaning to it. It’s a bit difficult to explain, especially for westerners, and it’s hard to pronounce. You can see it as just a [brand] name like Adidas or Pierre Cardin.

TH: What projects have you been involved in this year?

ZXZZ: I did an modern art exhibit with Jin Feng, Yuan Gong and Xi Jianjun at Peking University’s Sackler Museum of Art and Archeology titled ”3+X” Each Expression [“3+X”各自表述] in April. It went
really well. A lot of people came, but I don’t care that much about the modern art part of my work. I realize that a lot of people like it just because of my music or my novel. I’ve done a couple of master works in this area, like the 2007 *I Love Modern Art Too* [我也爱当代艺术] and a piece I did with a friend from Beijing’s East Village in 1995 called *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* [为无名山增高一米].

My novel came out in 2000 and is titled *Kuangquan Feimu* [狂犬吠墓]. This book was based on the desire to create something from actual events that happened to me in 1997. On the night I was to return from Hong Kong, the Tongzhou District government in Beijing considered me a suspect in the bombing of the Oriental Chemical Plant. It was this or perhaps it was just an excuse to make me and my girlfriend at the time disappear for over 20 days. The story changed and through some creative thinking it became a “metamorphosis” of a novel. My second novel will be published by Shanghai People’s Publishing House in August. It’s called *Youshang de Laoban* [忧伤的老板]. Anyone can take a look. There’s a lot of interesting stuff in it about the changes in Beijing art over the last 20 years.

TH: You held your very first concert this year. Why are your performances so infrequent?

ZXZZ: This is my 17th year in the art business and it was my first concert in Beijing. I called it *All the Best* [万事如意]. A lot of good friends helped out, such as Ai Weiwei, Meng Jinghui, Zhu Wen, Jia Zhangke, Ning Jie and Li Yanliang. The DVD of the performance is almost finished, which will give people who didn’t come a chance to see it. If possible I will have many more concerts in the future. Now that the dust has settled after the last ten years, there are a lot more young people who like my music, which I’m very happy about. There are a lot of young people in China who have no way to live up to their ideals but I’m doing this.

TH: You were formerly in the military, so how did you get your start in art and music?

ZXZZ: The formal start to my art career, or when I announced it, was in 1993. I left the military in 1990. I sold cassette tapes on the streets of Shanghai and before enlisting I learned a little guitar. I had to figure everything out myself for all of my music, art, poetry and novels. I left my small city near Jianhu in Jiangsu after I graduated from lower middle school. I don’t remember anything about it. In 1993, a few friends and I established the avant garde art community Beijing East Village. This community sill has a very large influence on modern artists today.

TH: You said you had dinner once with Ai Weiwei and Han Han. When was this and what did you talk about? Can you compare your personality and work with theirs?

ZXZZ: Han Han and I have admired each other for a long time now but we never actually met until last summer. I introduced him to Ai Weiwei that day, and they admire each other’s work too. I thought I should let them do most of the talking. Han Han and Weiwei spoke mostly of social problems. I spoke with Han Han largely about domestic life and interests. We could have gone on forever.

I’ve known Ai Weiwei for 16 years. I met him when he came back from New York’s East Village and came to Beijing’s East Village to hang out. We have a really close relationship. I stayed with him the whole time in 2009 when he went to Chengdu to present evidence for Tan Zuoren. I’m the guy wearing the hat on cover of the documentary *Laoma Tihua* [老妈蹄花].

Ai Weiwei and Han Han’s thinking have very strong logic, and their writing is clean and agile. They conduct themselves a bit more rationally than I do. I’m more carefree and emotive. I rely more on my instincts to create and do things. I don’t use plans. Also my age is right between theirs. Weiwei is about 12 or 13 years older and Han Han is that much younger. I’m honored to have them as friends and we get along well together.
Tim Hathaway is a regular contributor to Southern Weekly (南方周末) as well as their translator. Read his article about the collaboration between Zuoxiao Zuzhou and the Cowboy Junkies in English here and in Chinese here.

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